

School Evaluation Report

Challenge Foundation Academy

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46205**

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Part 1: The School Context

Information about the school:

Challenge Foundation Academy serves 475 students in kindergarten through grade 5. Of these, 14 percent are special education students. There are no English language learner students enrolled at the school. Approximately 99 percent of the students are African American. There is universal Title 1 eligibility.

The school is a charter school in its fifth year of operation. Student attendance last academic year was 96.2 percent, just above the state average of 95.9 percent.

The school made Adequate Yearly Progress in 2010, with a very positive trend in test results over the last three years in both English language arts (ELA) and mathematics. Nevertheless, test results were below the State average. However, students demonstrated strong growth in ELA, with even stronger growth in mathematics, so that they make above average progress during their time in the school.

The school has adopted the transformation model for the School Improvement Grant (SIG).

Part 2: Overview

The areas of the school that have been improved:

- Instructional leadership has been distributed across the school and has therefore been strengthened. This has led to some positive impact on learning and student outcomes.
- Staff can identify improvements in the attitudes and behavior of individual students as a result of attending 'Saturday School' which serves students who have been removed from classrooms.
- Daily attendance and punctuality have improved.
- Behavioral incidents are dealt with quickly and effectively in response to teachers' request for support. This has lessened disruptions to the learning of other students.
- Intervention teachers are being used effectively to increase the amount of targeted instruction in small groups, thereby supporting individual students in making good progress, as well as enabling some classroom visits to take place by mentor teachers.
- Systems and protocols for the Teacher Advancement Program (TAP) have been developed and deployed, increasing the number of classroom visits. Overall, teachers have bought-in to the framework and welcome the increased feedback being provided.
- Teachers have access to a range of data and there is some use to determine the specific learning needs for individual students within their class and to inform the focus for smaller learning groups.
- Data is being used effectively to identify school-wide development needs. Collaborative team meetings are in place to disseminate this information and to provide teachers with the skills and tools to address those needs.
- Teachers are provided a good level of collaborative time during the school day which is beginning to add some consistency and improvement to their practice.
- Monday Clubs, some of which are in collaboration with community partners, provide a broader range of learning experiences for those students that attend. Parents and students also appreciate the additional opportunities that are provided for tutoring.
- Families and teachers value the early literacy home visits that have taken place. These have helped to provide resources and skills for families to support reading, as well as information for teachers, and strengthened the link between school and home.
- The use of technology to support learning has increased.
- Additional posts identified within the School Improvement Grant (SIG) application have been put into place.

The areas of the school that remain to be improved:

- The school has yet to formulate how it will measure the impact of some aspects of its improvement agenda and decide whether the progress made provides good value for the time and money invested in it.
- Organizational difficulties have limited the time available for mentor teachers to spend with their teachers. Teachers feel that feedback has not always been consistent from different instructional leaders and that support has not always been followed-up with sufficient rigor or consistency.
- Behavioral incidents and the occurrence of petty arguments and squabbles remain too high. Not enough students are consistently able to self correct and to take responsibility for their own actions.
- Strategies that require every student to engage at all times are not widespread.
- There are inconsistencies in the way that adults in the building implement those school-wide expectations that do exist and procedures and protocols vary from classroom to classroom.
- There is not yet sufficient articulation within the curriculum to ensure consistency of practice and expectations across a grade, to ensure preparedness for the next grade and to ensure the coherent and progressive development of students' skills.
- While elements of the workshop approach are evident in places, there remain insufficient opportunities for students to work collaboratively and to take responsibility for their own learning. In addition, many opportunities to scaffold and differentiate support for students are missed.
- Initial plans for formative assessments matched to pacing guides proved to be impractical in practice, leaving the need to develop them internally.
- Learning objectives are not always specific and measurable, nor is progress towards them routinely checked during and at the end of lessons.

Part 3: Main Findings

Overall Evaluation: The school's overall performance and the extent to which the SIG funding has resulted in significant improvement:

This school has made satisfactory improvement.

There is good correlation between the elements identified within the SIG application and the developments taking place within the school. The resources provided by the grant are being used appropriately to secure the improvements intended. Where intentions have not been achieved as rigorously as planned, the school has been reflective and evaluative in determining the reasons why. As a result, plans are being formulated to improve the impact in the years ahead. To aid this process, the school should determine the clear and measurable outcomes required from each activity to demonstrate the impact and to ensure that value for money has been achieved.

Much attention has been paid to improving the impact of instruction on learning and student outcomes. While improvements have been made, much work remains to be done if high quality learning is to be consistently achieved in every classroom. Similarly, the school can point to improved student attendance and punctuality, as well as improvements in students' attitudes and behavior. Again, however, much work lies ahead if the school is to achieve its aim of having students develop intrinsic motivation for positive behavior enabling them to take full responsibility for their own actions. This directly parallels students taking greater responsibility for their own learning and academic outcomes. The school enjoys constructive relationships with most families and these have been further strengthened this year.

Data is being used effectively to identify school-wide development needs and mechanisms are in place to address them. Individual and teams of teachers are using data to improve the impact of their work, although with varying degrees of success as yet. While the curriculum is reasonably secure, greater attention is required to ensure that aspects, such as the Core Knowledge program, are implemented with greater fidelity. In addition, greater uniformity is required in the vertical articulation of the curriculum, particularly to support more rapid student transition to a new teacher.

There is capacity within the school to sustain the improvements accomplished over this year and the positive trend in student achievement over the last few years. However, greater accountability in some aspects of the school is required, especially the consistency with which school-wide expectations are implemented and the impact on student outcomes of the support provided to teachers. It will be essential to ensure that targeted developments, both for individual staff and school-wide, are prioritized and sequential, rather than attempted simultaneously.

Commentary on SIG improvement areas:

Increase Learning Time

Teachers are pleased with the responsive support provided by instructional leaders if they are having difficulties with a student. The immediacy of the response and the quick resolution, which may include removal from class, is helping them to maintain greater continuity, limiting the loss of learning time for other students. While some teachers make greater use of the system than others, school leaders have not determined any overuse or abuse of the system. The school is implementing a Positive Behavior Intervention and Supports (PBIS) system so praise and constructive reinforcement are common place. As a result, interactions between adults and students, as well as between students, tend to be

encouraging. While the overall school climate and culture are positive and welcoming, low level inappropriate interactions between students remain.

Saturday School is being implemented to ensure that students who are removed from classrooms make up some of the time lost. Sessions are organized in response to need, rather than being scheduled at set times. The immediacy of this arrangement is a significant factor in acting as a deterrent to repeat offending. Staff have identified improvements in the attitudes and behavior of individual students as a result of the sessions, as well as discerning an impact on the overall school climate. However, the school has not yet determined how it will measure the impact of this activity to ensure that it has the required effect and is cost effective.

The school's aim is to work with students to help them develop intrinsic motivation for positive attitudes and behavior. A school-wide character development program is currently being planned to help achieve this desired outcome. Currently, teachers are aware of significant inconsistencies in the way that they enact school-wide expectations, such as student conduct in hallways. Similar guidelines for common expectations in classrooms would help school leaders to hold teachers more accountable. This would also help to shorten the time that students take to transition from one teacher to another, as expectations and protocols would be increasingly consistent across the school. There is some potential to increase the role of team leaders on each grade in reinforcing the consistent implementation of such school-wide expectations.

Opportunities for students to work collaboratively and take responsibility for their own learning are limited, although there are examples of effective workshop practice. While most students engage positively with the work presented in lessons, strategies that require all students to engage intellectually with it, as well as scaffolding and differentiation that ensure that the work is accessible to all students, are limited. More opportunities in these aspects would also support the development of students' intrinsic motivations. Intervention teachers have increased the amount of small group instruction taking place, enabling the identified needs of individual students to be met more precisely. This is increasing the amount of effective learning time and aiding individual student progress. Monday Club and after school tutoring also extend the learning time available to students. However, not all families are able to take advantage of these opportunities, often as a result of transportation issues.

Recommendations

- *The school should now identify how it will measure the impact of school improvement activities, such as Saturday School, and how it will decide if this is sufficient.*
- *Develop the ability and inclination of students to self regulate their behavior and to take greater responsibility for their own actions.*
- *Develop school-wide norms and expectations for adult and student behaviors, in classrooms as well as hallways, which are consistently implemented by all.*

Strengthen instructional leadership and professional development

The school has developed a workable system for TAP, with instructional leaders attending professional development to aid its implementation. Nevertheless, this first year has been a significant learning curve for the team. As the only school in the state involved in the program, local support has not always been readily available throughout the year. As a result, the school has been learning, to a greater extent than desirable, as implementation has occurred. However, progress and development have been sustained because instructional leaders have been reflective and evaluative, so that changes have been made as required. With more schools coming into the TAP next year, a statewide network is developing, thereby increasing access to external support and guidance. However, the principal must ensure that this support is timely, utilized fully and targeted to meet the specific needs of this school. In particular, the school needs to be in a position to introduce Individual Growth Plans for teachers to drive their professional development at the commencement of the next academic year.

Intervention teachers have supported the work of mentor teachers by taking their classes while they work with other teachers. However, this has not happened to the extent anticipated, limiting developmental support for teachers. Master teachers who do not have classes, have been more flexible in their classroom visits and support. Overall, teachers have bought-in to the concept and understand the role of increasing the impact of their instruction on learning and student outcomes. They welcome the increased classroom visits that are taking place and the feedback that they receive. However, they recognize that this needs to become more systematic. Feedback from different observers has not always been consistent, with differing suggestions for development being provided. In addition, they feel that the follow-up has not always been there, or been timely. As a result, the school is currently developing plans to be more systematic next year, including building the time that intervention teachers take the mentor teacher's whole class into the schedule from the start of the year. The principal should also consider carefully who is best placed to provide embedded professional development for each teacher, as well as how many staff work with each individual, the precise focus of the development being supported and how this relates to the teacher's IGP. In addition, the principal should also review the balance of time that he spends providing direct support to teachers and monitoring the work of his instructional leadership team.

Data from benchmark and state tests is being used effectively to identify developments that are needed across the school, such as improving students' comprehension of non-fiction texts. Collaborative team meetings, led by master teachers and supported by the administration, are in place to disseminate this information and to provide teachers with the skills and tools required to address the identified needs. Subsequent implementation is evident in classrooms, albeit to varying degrees. Teachers have a good level of time during the school to collaborate with peers and this is helping to bring greater uniformity to practice, although much work remains to be done to raise this to a level that provides consistently positive impact.

Recommendations

- *Develop systems and structures for the deployment of intervention teachers that enables the work of the mentor teachers to be more systematic in providing support for teachers.*
- *Focus the support for individual teachers on the development that will have most impact for their students, and ensure that timely and effective follow-up results in measurable improvement. Ensure that this is tied into Individual Growth Plans.*
- *Review the structure of support for teachers, strategically allocating instructional leaders to where they will have most impact, and ensure that teachers receive consistent and progressive feedback and support.*
- *Ensure that instructional leaders are held accountable for the impact of their work in improving learning and raising student outcomes.*
- *Ensure that the support and guidance from the statewide TAP network is sufficiently targeted at meeting the school's specific needs and is utilized fully to enable next steps, such as the implementation of Individual Growth Plans, to be timely and successful.*

Improve classroom instruction and lesson differentiation

Students have access to a range of 'specials' in addition to the core of English language arts and mathematics, including music, art, media and physical education. The adoption of Core Knowledge also ensures that there is an appropriate focus on science and social studies. Enrichment activities such as Monday Clubs and after school tutoring, often in association with community partners, provide additional opportunities and academic support for those involved. However, the fidelity with which the curriculum is developed varies from classroom to classroom. In addition, the school has yet to adopt a common language, used consistently by all teachers, to define the strategies and expectations that bind the curriculum together, horizontally and vertically. This lack of consistency and uniformity is resulting in vertical coherence that is not as strong as it needs to be to fully support student progress and transition between grades.

There is evidence of some of the basic aspects of the workshop model being adopted throughout the school, but with much variation in the rigor with which it is carried out in different classrooms. Too often, it is difficult to discern what the specific objectives of different small groups within the classroom are. There is sometimes no expected product to hold students accountable and for the teacher to determine whether learning time has been productive. Similarly, many opportunities are missed to extend student responsibility by defining different roles within the small groups. There are also times when the teacher pays insufficient attention to the engagement of the students, providing little or no intervention to maintain their focus. When working as a whole class, opportunities are missed to develop collaborative learning strategies, such as 'turn and talk to your neighbor', that will support more effective workshop practice. In addition, a limited range of strategies are employed that require all students to engage intellectually with their work at all times, so that some students lose focus without disturbing the rest of the class.

There is evidence of teachers having access to data and using this to determine specific learning needs for their class, for example determining the focus of mini-lessons. Earlier grades use Dynamic Indicators of Basic Early Literacy Skills (DIBELS) to measure student achievement and track their progress. Interim assessments are also used to provide staged information on student growth and diagnostic assessments of their learning needs. However, work with data has yet to fully flow through to classrooms where there is insufficient scaffolding or differentiation for students, whether working individually, in small groups or as a whole class. Too frequently all students in the class are working with the same resources, regardless of their specific needs or skills. The school has worked with additional formative assessment systems to match specifically to internal pacing of state standards, although they have not proved suitable. Nevertheless, the development of common formative assessments remains on the school's agenda.

Classrooms tend to have learning objectives posted, although not always in ways that students can readily appreciate. Sometimes the intended outcome is also made clear, such as 'at least one side of writing'. However, it is not common for teachers to check for progress towards the objective during or at the end of the lesson, so that they do not have the immediacy to adapt the lesson as required to fully match students' achievements. Sometimes teachers explain how current work builds on previous learning or fits into future plans. However, this is not universal, so students often know what they are doing, but are less clear as to why they are doing it. Rubrics, to define what quality outcomes should be, exist, although they are not in common usage to help students to understand the quality of their work and what they need to do to improve. Hence, opportunities for self and peer review remain limited, thereby not providing strong support for students in taking responsibility for their own learning.

Technology is evident throughout the school and teachers are routinely using interactive whiteboards in their classrooms. In some rooms teachers have developed sufficient confidence with the resource to be increasingly including the students in using it. Students also have regular use of computers, which are often utilized as part of workshops and small group activities. Overall, the use of technology is having a positive impact on student motivation and engagement.

Recommendations

- *Increase the opportunities for students to work collaboratively and to take greater responsibility for their own learning.*
- *Increase the use of strategies that require all students to engage intellectually with the work of the classroom at all times.*
- *Develop teachers' expertise in using data to drive instruction, especially in providing scaffolds to help students to build their learning, and in differentiating their instruction.*
- *Develop teachers' expertise in writing specific measurable objectives and in checking progress toward them during and at the end of lessons.*
- *Increase the use and impact of common formative assessments and rubrics to define quality and next steps.*

- *Define what a successful student can do by the end of grade 5 and backward plan this to define the skill set required for each grade. Adopt a school-wide language to support consistent implementation.*

Engage families

Challenge Foundation Academy has been very intentional in its attempt to engage families. The school has identified the use of Family Nights, the expansion of the Early Literacy Home Visits, and the office of a Director of School Culture as the proposed means for increasing family engagement. These initiatives have all been implemented with success and are beginning to have a positive impact. Family Nights are very well attended by parents to the extent that there is insufficient space at the school to accommodate all who attend. The school has therefore decided to split these events by grades on different nights to better accommodate all who attend. The Family Nights are hosted once per month and focus on a different theme each time. Parents regard these events as positive and they serve to bring families together to work on academic and social activities, reinforcing the sense of community at the school.

The school has expanded its literacy home visits. They are working well to support students' reading development by encouraging increased reading in the home, the development of parents' literacy skills for helping their children, the development of home libraries, as well as building teachers' understanding of the home and community life of their students. Parents, students and teachers alike, all value highly these home visits which are organized around parents' availability. Visits are well organized and managed.

The Director of Culture is effectively coordinating the efforts of the school to develop a culture that supports students' academic and behavioral success. The school reaches out to parents when there are concerns about the attendance or tardiness of their children and the attendance policy is implemented effectively. Through thorough investigation of the issues that hinder students' regular and punctual attendance, the school targets the appropriate resources needed to support families experiencing difficulty. There has been an increase in daily attendance, as well as an accompanying reduction in the percentage of students who are tardy.

Overall, the school has implemented the range of initiatives outlined in the SIG application to engage its families and there are many indicators of doing so successfully. Parents are at the school very regularly and many comment that they are almost regarded as staff members because of the amount of time they spend at the school. Fathers serve as Hallway Dads; parents visit and spend time in their children's classes; there is constant communication between teachers and parents via mobile technology including text messages and phone calls; parents/guardians have to sign their children out of their classes at the end of the day, increasing contact and communication with the school. Parents feel that they are encouraged to act as advocates for their children and that the school responds quickly and effectively to any concerns or issues that they raise.

Recommendations

- *Develop success criteria and systems for measuring the impact of the initiatives to engage parents.*
- *Explore ways of involving more fully those parents who are not currently engaged in some way with the school.*